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ABSTRACT

Implications of the use and misuse of physical punishment in the socialization and training of children is the subject of this discussion. This discussion deals primarily with the implications of the use by parents of physical pain as a child-rearing technique by which they attempt to implement their goals for their children, whether it be the acquisition of positive behaviors or the extinction of unacceptable or negative behaviors. An unfavorable view is taken of parental resort to physical punishment, based on a personal position and empirical psychological research. The personal reasons include: (1) the issue of the unfairness of an adult physically striking a child, (2) the issue of language, i.e. the reliance of humans on verbal means in the training of their young, and (3) the issue of intentionality, the deliberate infliction of physical pain. On the scientific level, three principal sources of empirical literature are drawn upon to support the position of opposition of physical punishment. The first relates to studies on the consequences of punishment in the context of child-rearing practices; the second relevant data sources are the experimental studies of the effects of punishment; and the third pertinent set of investigations are those studies relating inhibitory traits to other personality attributes, particularly aggression. (CK)

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# THE EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD*

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# THE EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD

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## Introduction

My perception of issues in children's behavior is guided on the one hand from the point of the view of a developmental psychologist, concerned with the description and explanation of children's behavior and on the other hand from my perspective as a clinical psychologist concerned with the welfare of children, with their pain and its alleviation and prevention.

From the vantage point of these two orientations, I would like to share an observation. I find it a very curious fact--that there is a marked inconsistency in the willingness of many developmental psychologists to take a very bold and articulated stand on the pros and cons of the effects of exposure to various kinds of children's television programs and yet remain relatively quiet regarding a more profound problem in our society, namely the psychological consequences of physical abuse that children may be exposed to--whether in the context of the home, school, or community.

The controversy regarding the effects of aggressive television is outside the content scope of this paper. I personally withdraw from the debate because of my rejection of the values implicit in aggressive TV content independent of its stimulating or cathartic effects. My only purpose in raising this issue is to share my puzzlement at the intense position taken by some developmental psychologists regarding the negative consequences of aggressive television and the need for public controls in this area while at the same time making no public utterances nor encouraging no President's Commission of the effects of physical punishment which clearly appears to my clinical eye to be a much more virulent source of violence in our culture than television.

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In general, I believe most clinical psychologists have been less concerned with the television controversy and more concerned and vocal with regard to such social issues as the elimination of corporal punishment in schools and to the pathology surrounding the causes and consequences of brutality toward children. The dynamics relating to the discrepancy between the clinical and developmental psychologist's academic and public interests, while a fascinating topic for conjecture, must be left to some future symposium devoted to the social psychology of the professional interests of psychologists. This symposium is concerned with Violence Against Children and the focus of this paper is on the implications of the use and misuse of physical punishment in the socialization and training of children.

My discussion will not be restricted to the more dramatic abuses of this practice but will deal primarily with the implications of the use by parents of physical pain as a child-rearing technique by which they attempt to implement their goals for their children, whether it be the acquisition of positive behaviors or the extinction of unacceptable or negative behaviors.

I assume by now that you have appropriately deduced, that I take an extremely unfavorable view of parental resort to physical punishment. The bases for my position reside in my personal value system as well as in the substance of empirical psychological research. On the personal level, I would like to make a few brief points:

1. The issue of unfairness

   There is a basic inequity in an adult physically striking a child. We are taught to fight fair. And while I do not intend a full analogy between child rearing and combat...it must be obvious that the match is not an equal one.

2. Then there is the issue of language

   Isn't it strange and alien--that man and woman--the only species which has the most advanced communication system--must rely on non-verbal means in the training of their young?

3. Finally, there is the issue of intentionality--the deliberate infliction of physical pain. What level of civilization must we yet achieve before we relinquish primitive and painful patterns of human interaction? Subjecting others, child or adult, to deliberate physical pain, in my judgment, is not a civilized practice and we should not subject our young to that experience.

On the scientific level, I draw upon three principle sources of empirical literature to support my position opposing the use of physical punishment. The first relates to studies on the consequences of punishment in the context of child-rearing practices, the second relevant data sources are the experimental studies of the effects of punishment, and the third pertinent set of investigations are those studies relating inhibitory traits to other personality attributes, particularly aggression.

## Child-Rearing Studies

Unfortunately, none of this literature is free from ambiguity and controversy. Many of the studies simultaneously have the virtue of data collected in more naturalistic circumstances and the disadvantage of data reflecting one or another methodological limitation. However, acknowledging the methodological limitations of individual investigations, there is a surprising degree of consistency in the overall pattern of findings yielded by these studies, especially when one considers the diversity of procedures, measures, and populations employed by different investigators.

Studies of child-rearing practices, assessing the effects of parental punishment, especially the use of physical punishment, yield a consistent outcome. In general, the degree of parental punitiveness has been found to be positively correlated with various forms of psychopathology, especially delinquency and aggressive acting-out behavior (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1972; McCord, McCord & Howard, 1961). I concur with the methodological reservations raised by Yarrow, Campbell & Burton (1969) and recognize the difficulty of establishing causal relations between specific child-rearing practices and specific behaviors in the child. Parental behaviors such as severe punishment or maternal rejection, do not operate in isolation but occur in conjunction with other aspects of the home environment. In addition, the child's behavior may well affect his parents' reactions to him so that it is sometimes difficult to determine whether a particular parental method of handling a child is a cause or is a result of this child's action (Bell, 1968). Finally, a variety of methods, all subject to varying sources of distortion and error, have been used to assess the parent and the child's attitudes and behaviors. Consequently, many different interpretations of the data, especially where some studies report non-significant findings, can be offered.

Nevertheless, I am impressed by the degree of consistency in the findings yielded by very diverse studies of the effects of parental punishment. It is true that my interpretation of these data is consistent with my personal bias. However, others have drawn a similar conclusion from these same data (Becker, 1964; Eron, Walder & Lefkowitz, 1971). If we consider the data relating the degree of parental use of physical punishment and the child's aggressive behavior we find surprisingly little evidence of inhibitory effects even when the punishment has been specifically directed toward aggressive infractions. Rather, the predominant finding has been a positive relationship between physical punishment and aggression. The following quotation from Eron, Walder & Lefkowitz's (1971) recent volume on the learning of aggression in children is illustrative:

> "...we anticipated that punishment for aggressive behavior would lead to inhibition of aggression in situations similar to the one in which punishment was originally administered. Findings of field studies contradicted these predictions derived from laboratory research in that increased aggression was routinely found to be associated with increased punishment for this behavior. It was believed at first that the contradiction was due to lack of control for intensity of punishment in field studies...However, the results with punishment intensity as it related to peer-rated aggression remained the same--the more intense the punishment by the parents at home, the higher the aggression as rated by the children's peers at home" (p. 91).

Laboratory Studies

Turning now to the experimental literature on punishment, we find support for the view that punishment is relatively ineffective as a technique for eliminating undesired behaviors. The early work of Skinner (1938) and Estes (1944), using physical punishment with animals, indicated that punishment acted only temporarily to suppress a response rather than extinguish it. The generalization that punishment was not a dependable mechanism for changing behavior prevailed for two decades until it was called into question by the work of Solomon (1964) and his associates and subsequently by other investigations (Boe & Church, 1966; Parke, 1972). In recent years, much more research has been carried out with children although, thankfully, for obvious ethical reasons, reproof and deprivation rather than physical pain have been used as the mode of punishment. Parke, after an extensive series of studies, with six to eight year-old children, concluded,

> "It is unlikely that a socialization program based solely on punishment would be very effective; the child needs to be taught new appropriate responses in addition to learning to suppress unacceptable forms of behavior," (Parke, 1972, p. 281).

Punishment not only fails to communicate to the child what is the desired response but its effect even as a suppressor depends upon the right combination of a complex set of parameters including timing, intensity, consistency and the affectional relationship between the child and the punitive agent.

Although physical punishment was not employed in these studies, its effectiveness should be contingent upon the same parameters as other modes of punishment. It is also of note that experimental studies on punishment have been primarily concerned with the impact of punishment on the undesired response, and rarely assessed possible incidental consequences of punishment such as anxiety and hostility. There is a considerable amount of research which indicates that physical pain is a strong elicitor of aggressive behavior as well as producing fears of the painful situation and of generalized stimuli that are difficult to extinguish (Solomon & Wynne, 1953). If we combine the experimental research on punishment with the data on the effects of physical pain, it would appear that physical punishment has limited utility as a response suppressor and may well produce incidental effects which produce negative consequences for the child's adjustment that can be more undesirable than the response being punished.

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Personality Correlates

The third category of research which questions the efficacy of anxiety evoking procedures such as physical punishment as a mechanism for controlling behavior are studies of personality correlates of aggressive behavior. The results of a series of experimental studies by Feshbach and his co-workers (Feshbach & Jaffe, 1971) provide evidence that, under permissive conditions, subjects with a high degree of anxiety over aggression will actually respond more aggressively than subjects with a low degree of aggression-anxiety. Data from the previously cited study of Eron, Walder & Lefkowitz (1971) are consistent with these findings. While anxiety over aggression can come about for reasons other than punishment for aggressive behavior, it seems reasonable to assume some relationship

between anxiety and exposure to punishment. In any event, these studies suggest that fear is an unreliable method to employ to restrain some undesirable behavioral tendency. Additional evidence pertinent to this proposition is provided in the studies of Megargee and his associates (Megargee, 1971). In their studies of extremely assaultive individuals who have committed homocides, assault and battery, and related offenses, they have isolated a personality pattern labeled Chronic Overcontrol. These offenders appear to be profoundly repressed individuals who, although outwardly controlled, are inwardly alienated and potentially capable of extremely violent, anti-social acts.

Implications

Clearly some methods of behavioral control are counter-productive. And again I want to re-emphasize the fact that the issue is not whether controls over socially undesirable behaviors are necessary but how such controls are to be achieved. The use of corporal punishment--by the state, by the school or by the parent, is simply a poor method of socializing children. It is unreliable and can facilitate the very behavior it is designed to inhibit. In the case of aggression the boomerang possibilities of corporal punishment are obvious. Physical punishment is a source of frustration and pain, and, as such, it may stimulate anger and aggressive tendencies. The parent who uses physical aggression in punishing his child is also serving as an aggressive model. As Bandura's (Bandura & Walters, 1963) work so clearly reflects, the child, through imitation, may be acquiring aggressive response patterns although ostensibly being taught that aggression is bad.

Obviously, an occasional spank is not going to traumatize a child, destroy his spirit or make him anxious and hostile. However, the use of corporal punishment, by schools and by parents, as a prescribed mode of discipline for certain infractions, is objectionable. It sets a poor example for the child. It teaches the child that physical punishment is the appropriate response to use in conflict situations.

The difference between an adult hitting a child because he misbehaved and an adolescent hitting an adult because he said or did something of which the adolescent disapproved is a subtle distinction for many adolescents. How can a young child comprehend this difference? And comprehension on the part of the child is important

to achieve. Mere rewards and punishments without a reasonable cognitive rationale, not only offends the child's sense of justice, but leads to inappropriate generalizations and the absence of guidelines for novel situations. Physical punishment is particularly difficult to rationalize since the relationship between some misbehaviors, such as continuing to play outside during dinner, and getting spanked is so arbitrary. It would be more appropriate for the child to eat a cold dinner or get his or her own dinner.

Physical punishment needs to be eliminated for the adult punitive agent's sake as well as for the sake of the child who is being punished. Too often, physical punishment is no more than a retaliation--and reflects a level of morality at the lower end of Kohlberg's (1963) scale of moral development. Repeated use of physical punishment may harden the parents. Parents may learn to cope with the pain they inflict on their children by becoming inured to it. The loss of empathy that might have taken place in the punishment situation may generalize to other situations in which the child is in distress and is in need of parental help. Finally, reliance on corporal punishment interferes with the adoption of more constructive solutions to the problem that the child's misbehavior presents. The parent becomes satisfied with short-lived restraints, accompanied perhaps by an emotional catharsis, when instead methods are needed by which the parent can encourage and reinforce the desired behavior.

As a parent of three active, creative, independent children, I am fully aware of the difficulty of finding appropriate methods for disciplining undesired behaviors and reinforcing valued attitudes and actions. As a parent and as a psychologist, I appreciate the necessity for training children to respect the needs of others, to cope with present frustrations and anticipate the future consequences of their actions. I do not believe that children, if left unhampered and to their own devices, will blossom into effective, thoughtful and responsible adults. Yet I also believe that many child-rearing efforts are misguided by an essentially negative orientation which emphasizes restraints rather than new behaviors, repression rather than growth. The pre-ego-psychology psychoanalytic model of the child is still with us. Emphasis on punitive procedures, whether through corporal punishment or other fear-eliciting methods, presupposes that the child is basically an antisocial organism, ridden with unacceptable, aggressive, libidinal and self-seeking impulses which must be blocked if the child is to develop into a socialized adult. Much more

consonant with current cognitively oriented theories of child development is a view which sees the young child as capable of varied behaviors--both socially valued and socially disapproved, and which sees socialization as primarily a process by which children are provided experiences which enlarge their horizons and which encourage and reinforces socially valued behaviors.

The regulation of aggressive behaviors provides an instructive example of the contrast between aversive and non-aversive methods of socialization. I have already previously reviewed the evidence indicating that corporal punishment is likely to facilitate rather than inhibit aggressive behavior. One promising alternative is the application of operant reinforcement procedures as exemplified, for example, in the work of Brown & Elliott (1965) in their efforts to modify aggressive behaviors in nursery school settings. Nursery school teachers were instructed to ignore aggressive acts whenever possible and to direct their attention to non-aggressive, cooperative behaviors. Changes in the behavior of the groups reflected a significant and substantial decline in the frequency with which the children engaged in physical and in verbal aggression.

The elaboration of cognitive processes mediating self-control and interpersonal sensitivity provides alternative non-aversive methods for fostering non-aggressive behavior. My own research in this area has been concerned with the development of empathy in children (Feshbach & Roe, 1968; Feshbach, 1972) and with the situational circumstances which maximize empathic reactions. The relationship of empathy to aggression has also explored and, as might be anticipated, it was found that the child who is high in empathy is less aggressive than the child who is low in empathy (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969).

Today, there is lively research activity in the investigation of other forms of pro-social and positive behaviors as generosity (Rutherford & Mussen, 1968), altruism (Bryan & London, 1970), helping behaviors (Staub, 1970), kindness (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1970), and cooperation (Madsen, 1971). We have as yet to explore the role that these positive behaviors may play in the socialization of the child, and need to assess how these positive social behaviors help regulate those behavioral tendencies judged to be undesirable or unacceptable. However, if the development and facilitation of these kinds of positive, pro-social behaviors such as empathy, kindness, and altruism can perform a control function similar to that assigned to punishment, then we might have a child who can be seen and also be heard.

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BG1